

## Vocational Qualifications Stakeholder Reference Group Meeting Notes & actions of meeting held on 25 February 2026

### Qualifications Wales attendees:

Jo Richards	(JR)	Director of Qualification Policy and Reform
Gareth Downey	(GD)	Head of VQ Monitoring and Awarding Body Compliance
Leanne Hallett	(LH)	Senior Qualifications Manager
Dean Seabrook	(DS)	Senior Qualifications Manager
Andrew Shipway	(AS)	Qualifications Manager
Elaine Carlile	(EC)	Strategic Engagement Manager

### Stakeholder attendees:

Christopher Stevens	(CS)	Welsh Government
Mark Campion	(MC)	Estyn
Heather Davidson	(HD)	Medr
Vivienne Wilfred	(VW)	Medr
Barry Walters	(BW)	Chair of CC Strategic WBL Group
Kelly Edwards	(KE)	ColegauCymru
Jeff Protheroe	(JP)	ColegauCymru
Lisa Mytton	(LM)	NTfW
Sarah Johns	(SJ)	NTfW

### Apologies:

Lleu Williams	(LW)	Head of Strategic Engagement
Yana Williams	(YM)	Chair of CC Curriculum and Quality Group

### 1.1 Welcome

- 1.1 EC welcomed members to the meeting and noted apologies.
- 1.2 EC led a review of the notes and requested updates on relevant actions from the October meeting, confirming that all the actions were either already closed or would be closed during the meeting.

### 2.1 Welsh Government Update

- 2.1 CS provided a comprehensive update on the Welsh Government's development of a strategic direction document for vocational education and training. He explained that the Welsh Government, in response to recommendations from the Sharon Lusher VQ review report, opted to develop a strategic direction document rather than a full strategy due to the timing of the upcoming Senedd elections. The document aims to provide a sustainable, long-term direction for vocational education and training in Wales, setting priorities for the incoming government. A VET stakeholder reference group, including representatives from Estyn, Medr, Qualifications Wales, and others, was formed to co-produce the document, ensuring broad engagement and reflection of sector needs.
- 2.2 The strategic direction document identifies five national priorities. Each priority is linked to the Welsh Government's economic mission and the four purposes of education, aiming to address challenges and set future directions. The document is expected to be published around week commencing 9 March, pending ministerial sign-off. It will detail achievements to date, ongoing

challenges, and future actions, and will serve as a foundation for either a dedicated VET strategy or a broader tertiary strategy, depending on the incoming government's decisions.

- 2.3 LM and BW thanked CS for the work on this, acknowledging the collaborative process and the importance of the document moving forward. It is hoped that this work can progress swiftly following the Senedd elections in May. There was a request for the slides to be shared by the group. CS will check with colleagues, and will share, if agreed.

**Action 1:** CS to check with colleagues, and if appropriate to share the presentation with EC to distribute to the group.

### 3.1 Medr Update

- 3.1 VW provided an update on the development and review of a range of apprenticeship frameworks. Work is ongoing in finalising additional units being developed in the creative sector, with collaboration from Vicki at QW and AIM as the awarding body. In agriculture and land, a light-touch review is planned but due to outdated NOS work is progressing with Lantra. At the moment work is progressing with QW to extend qualifications while the NOS update progresses.
- 3.2 Updates were also provided to qualification on the hairdressing and barbering frameworks, a review of energy frameworks with the Green Skills Academy at one of the colleges, and the potential introduction of a higher apprenticeship at level 4 in energy management. The Society for the Environment may provide accreditation for these qualifications.
- 3.3 A new level 4 digital forensics qualification is being developed in partnership with the Forensic Capability Network. Regulatory compliance qualifications are being considered for new pathways in housing and environment, with meetings planned to determine the best approach. A renewed interest by one college in a life sciences pathway was noted, leading to its extension.
- 3.4 Following a question from SJ regarding data engineering at level 5, VW confirmed this is progressing and will update SJ accordingly. SJ also asked about ALS who had been part of the original steering group on regulatory compliance and VW confirmed that she would be in contact with SJ in due course.

**Action 2:** VW to contact SJ on two matters: the progress of the data engineering level 5 qualification and the next stages of the regulatory compliance pathway development.

- 3.5 JP emphasised the importance of correctly sequencing NOS updates, qualification development, and framework reviews to avoid duplication and ensure coherence. LH noted that QW supports this process and described pausing work on education and training qualifications until NOS and professional standards are refreshed, aiming for a logical sequence in future reviews.
- 3.6 HD noted that she had already updated some members on the new programme and would be providing an update to QW staff the following day. Therefore due to time constraints in this meeting, HD did not provide an update and would contact MC from Estyn separately.

## 4.1 Estyn Update

- 4.1 MC noted that Estyn's programme of work for the forthcoming financial year had not been signed off yet by the Cabinet Secretary but provided some details of the plans relevant to the vocational sector. These included a review of health and wellbeing, considering AS to A2 progression and its implications for vocational pathways, and a two-year project on ALN post-16 transitions, examining outcomes for learners with IDPs.
- 4.2 In terms of publications, MS noted that reports on health and social care apprenticeships and on apprenticeship completion rates are scheduled for publication in June, with the possibility of simultaneous release depending on finalisation.
- 4.3 MC informed the group of the forthcoming changes in Estyn's post-16 team as he moves to Local Authority work. Mererid Williams will take over his role and Matt Williams will lead the apprenticeship work with Janine Bennett leading on core FE work. Steve Bell will stay on as the lead for adult learning in the community.
- 4.4 BW and JP discussed the significance of the AS to A2 progression issue, referencing previous research and the need to revisit hypotheses in the current context. MC welcomed further input.

**Action 3:** Members to send any thoughts or suggestions regarding the scope or hypotheses for the AS to A2 progression study to MC for consideration during the planning phase.

## 5.1 Qualifications Wales

- 5.1 GD reported that monitoring efforts for the forthcoming exams and assessments would be focused on approved qualifications in health and social care, construction and the built environment, and Essential Skills Wales, with awarding bodies being prepared for the summer period. A recognition process for reformed Essential Skills Wales qualifications will begin after Easter. Given that the busy period of assessment often leads to an increase in queries and issues, GD reminded the group that centres should first contact the relevant awarding body, and if they are dissatisfied with the response, to then escalate this to QW. GD requested members to share this message with providers, wherever possible.

**Action 4:** Members to pass on the message to providers that if they have any queries or issues regarding qualifications and assessment, they should contact the awarding body in the first instance, and if they are dissatisfied with the response, they can then escalate the matter to QW.

- 5.2 DS provided an update on construction and built environment qualifications linked to new apprenticeships. Following the minister's announcement, new level 2 apprenticeships will be introduced in bricklaying, site carpentry and scaffolding, with progression routes to updated level 3 qualifications in bricklaying and site carpentry. Qualification development is underway with City &

Guilds, alongside finalising regulatory approval criteria. This work is taking place during significant change in the construction sector, including implementation of recommendations from the Hackitt Review. As a result, future assessment requirements are being anticipated, and qualifications are being designed to meet current requirements and in a way which can accommodate any required future changes to ensure their continued industry recognition, including trade card requirements, with input from CITB. [Approval criteria](#) have already been published for a new Level 2 work based learning competence qualification in building improvement operations/building maintenance, addressing a potential gap created by existing qualifications ending this August. Development of this qualification is underway with Agored Cymru, with timelines to follow in due course.

- 5.3 LH discussed the implications of proposed reforms for first roll-out from September 2027 in England, ie the introduction of V levels, expansion of T levels, and two new level 2 pathways – a one-year foundation and a two-year occupational certificate, on post-16 vocational qualifications in Wales. QW has been closely monitoring these developments, assessing the potential impact on the Welsh qualifications offer, particularly where Wales relies on three nation qualifications outside reformed areas such as health and social care and construction and the built environment. While this model provides choice and viability, it also creates vulnerability to policy and funding changes in England. Engagement has taken place with key stakeholders including Estyn, Ofqual, DfE, Welsh Government, Medr, and major awarding bodies (Pearson, City & Guilds, NCFE, EAL, UAL and OCR). Awarding bodies are awaiting clarity from the DfE consultation outcome and Ofqual’s design requirements and have raised concerns about timelines and the limited initial scope of reforms. In the meantime, many are extending existing qualifications to provide stability for centres in Wales. Given wider uncertainty, including upcoming Senedd elections and delays to a national VET strategy, QW plans to publish a short term post-16 VQ action plan (2026–2028) in spring to provide stability and direction for learners and centres. Finally LH informed the group of the sector qualification group meetings that are scheduled between 11- 21 May. QW will liaise with ColegauCymru and NTfW to give providers an opportunity to update their representatives on these groups.
- 5.4 KE asked if the action plan could be shared in advance of publication. LH noted the request and QW will be in contact in due course. JP noted that it would be helpful if QW provided regular updates on the possible defunding of qualifications in England and how that may impact providers in Wales. LH confirmed that defunding of qualifications in England is currently paused, but once further information is available, QW will consider how best to communicate with providers to supplement the information available on QiW and the post-16 bulletin that is sent to providers twice a year.

**Action 5:** QW to liaise with ColeguCymru and NTfW regarding any updates required by providers to the current list of representatives on the Sector Qualification Groups.

**Action 6:** QW to consider how best to communicate with providers when further information is available on qualification provision in England.

5.5 AS thanked members for their contribution to the ESW consultation, which received 67 main responses and over 700 learner responses. Around 60% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed overall, with the proposals for Level 1 and 2 assessment changes. Respondents welcomed shorter assessments, flexible onscreen or on demand testing, and external marking, but raised concerns about result turnaround times, costs, and learner anxiety. There was strong support for portfolio based assessments at entry level, mixed views on the removal of level 3, and calls for clear guidance on implementation, fairness (including ALN and Welsh medium provision), and early access to sample assessment materials. Subject specific feedback was largely positive, including support for updated content, removal of planning sections, inclusion of financial literacy and AI awareness, and title changes, alongside debate about calculator use and assessment formats. Findings, decisions, and approval criteria are expected to be published around mid-June, with further refinement and stakeholder engagement continuing in the meantime.

## 6. Matters arising from Further Education and Work Based Learning engagement

6.1 KE noted the concerns from the sector that have already been shared with QW about submission deadlines for health and social care qualifications which impacts teaching time and staff workload. KE reiterated the request for QW to share the VQ action plan mentioned by LH, prior to publication.

## 7. AOB/forward plan

7.1 QW's high level Forward Plan was circulated prior to the meeting, including qualification reform and decision reports. Proposed dates for the next meetings were 23 June at 13:00 and 19 October at 13:00. Members to inform EC if there are any issues with the proposed dates.

**Action 7:** Members to inform EC if there are any issues with the proposed dates for the meetings in June and October 2026.

### Actions

**Action 1:** CS to check with colleagues, and if appropriate to share the presentation with EC to distribute to the group.

**Action 2:** VW to contact SJ on two matters: the progress of the data engineering level 5 qualification and the next stages of the regulatory compliance pathway development

**Action 3:** Members to send any thoughts or suggestions regarding the scope or hypotheses for the AS to A2 progression study to MC for consideration during the planning phase.

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**Action 7:** Members to inform EC if there are any issues with the proposed dates for the meetings in February and June.

### **Next meetings**

**23 June 2026 (13:00- 14:30)**

**19 October 2026 (13:00 – 14:30)**